

**“WISE ENOUGH TO PLAY THE FOOL”: RUSHDIE’S VISION
OF KASHMIR IN *SHALIMAR THE CLOWN***

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“ We shall meet again in Srinagar,
By the gates of the villa of peace,
Our hands blossoming into fists
Till the soldiers return the keys
And disappear. Again we’ll enter,
Our last world, the first that vanished
In our absence from the broken city.”
(*The Country Without A Post Office*, 30)

Kashmir, since the Independence in 1947, has been a bone of contention for two neighbouring states in the Indian sub continent and that struggle has keeps continuing even as I write this and as you read this. Clamour for self-determination, a fair election and basic protection of human rights have been silenced by a long and bloody separatist movement, the Indian Army’s occupation of the state and Pakistan’s constant meddling into internal affairs. The once paradise on earth has fallen, with efforts to bring back Kashmiris into the mainstream and healing psychological scars also hitting a roadblock.

Salman Rushdie in *Shalimar the Clown* presents us with a slice of history before the insurgency begun in the late 1980s. This history is of course Rushdie’s version, and much like Saleem Sinai’s fragmented physique, history too is like looking into kaleidoscope, constantly changing with every turn of the device. What Rushdie laments is the destruction of the pluralist fabric of the Kashmir Valley, which received the final nail in its coffin when the Kashmiri Pandits/Hindus were forced to leave the state under the diktats of the Islamic Militant Groups.

My paper would like to analyse the importance of what Rushdie hailed as “Kashmiriyat”, or the plurality of the language/culture and literature thriving in the valley. In this sense, Kashmir becomes a metaphor for the nation at large, which as we are all aware now, is under the threat of being homogenised by various Hindu Right Wing Groups who are equally interested in destroying the diversity that India has boasted of for so many centuries. The article would also like to problematise whether at all “kashmiriyat” had been a concrete reality in the state or was it construed/

constructed to give Kashmir a history of plurality and diversity.

Looking at the history, both political and cultural of the land we know as India, it is safe to say that it has been greatly influenced and inspired by two fundamental traditions: the Indo-Aryan cultural stream which provided Vedic philosophy, and the Indo-Muslim strand of culture based on the intertwining of 'bhaktimarg' and Islamic Sufism. "It is not surprising, therefore, to realise that the composite culture in India originated in an environment of reconciliation, rather than refutation, co-operation rather than confrontation, coexistence rather than mutual annihilation of the politically dominant Islamic strands". (*Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in India*, 2). The Sufi and Bhakti movements had erased any differences based on communal and religious lines, coalescing into almost a composite whole. As has been observed, "It was very common till very recently to have a *sadguru* or a *pir* having a common following of Hindu and Muslims. And no *pir* or *sadguru* ever forced a Hindu or a Muslim to give his religion for any other." (*Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in India*, 2).

It is this syncretic tradition that India once boasted of and that which has been under constant threat in the last few decades. With separatist movements and clamour for self-determination, violence has been on the rise, with friends turning foes and the concept of 'home' becoming an elusive and fleeting notion at best. In *Shalimar the Clown*, Rushdie deals with all this and more as "persons become nations; nations are forever changing; and identities are constantly fluctuating. His images stand as evidence of a unique form of memory, an imagined past made all the more real because of its consequences." (*Review on Shalimar the Clown*, 472). It is true that *Shalimar the Clown* does have the sprawling scale, the cinematic aspects, the Bollywood-style filmi sequences and the fabulistic characters that readers have come to expect from Rushdie. Sections of the book are in fact set in Los Angeles, that other great movie-making metropolis. One protagonist, the philandering United States ambassador to India, whose extramarital affair with a beautiful Kashmiri girl sets the plot in motion, even has the name of a famous film mogul: Max Ophuls. This, in a Rushdie novel, is surely not accidental. Talking of the syncretic tradition in Kashmir, Rushdie remarks, "Abdullah then mentioned *Kashmiriyat*, Kashmiriness, the belief that at the heart of the Kashmiri culture there was a common bond that transcended all other differences. Most bhand villages were Muslim but Pachigam was a mixture with families of Pandit background, the Kauls, the Misris... and even one family of dancing Jews." (*Shalimar the Clown*, 110)

Of all the separatist movements that have emerged over the years

since the Independence, none have been as violent and psychologically scarring as the Kashmiri people's fight for what they call "*Azadi*". There are factions who want self determination, some want to remain with India and amidst all this, the desire to identify themselves with Pakistan politically too have smudged the air of the valley. It cannot be denied that religion has played a significant role in the building up of the unrest and its subsequent expression. Pakistan. "The former American President Bill Clinton described the problem of Jammu and Kashmir as a problem of Hindu-Muslim relations; Indian nationalists describe it as a symbol of Indian secularism; Pakistan describes it as an 'unfinished agenda of the Partition', as it presumes that partition occurred on the basis of religion. The people of the state, therefore, are under constant pressure to change their self-image in terms of religious identity." (*Major Identities of Jammu and Kashmir State*, 70). As Rushdie remarks in the novel, "Pakistan has right on its side, said one rumour, "because here in Kashmir a Muslim is being prevented by a Hindu ruler from joining their coreligionists in a new Muslim state." (*Shalimar the Clown*, 86)

Conflicts in culturally plural societies may appear to be acute, particularly in situations beset with economic scarcity and exposed to exploitation by a political elite in quest of a support structure in a democratic polity. But, in fact, these conflicts may basically be only aspects of bargaining pressure politics, working toward a reasonable politico-economic deal rather than secession from the national mainstream. Kashmir has always been the site of a violent struggle for power, between India and Pakistan and parties with vested interest have at most times stoked the fire and kept the agitation going. It is too complicated an issue to have clear good/bad, white/black binaries, and it has only led to the fabric of the state being destroyed forever. Maybe the situation would have been different if the state of Kashmir would have had a homogenised religio/cultural sense of identity and belonging. But before the Hindu Pandits were forced to flee from the valley, there was a multiplicity of cultures and identities existing side by side, which Rushdie alludes to in the novel.

Amartya Sen has shrewdly observed, "Being born as Indians, we find ourselves in a culture that has had thousands of years of flourishing diversity, in a community that is proud of its many major languages and literatures, in a polity that tolerates dissent and a substantial heterogeneity of political ideas, and in a country that has persistently tried to make room for different religious and- what is also important to emphasise- diverse non-religious beliefs. We do not deserve credit for landing on such a splendidly plural society. What does, however depend on us is practising

an adequate pluralism- preserving and building on what we have received.” (*Indian Pluralism*, 38). It is tempting to see Rushdie’s portrayal of Kashmir as a stand-in for the multicultural Bombay of his past, the loss of which, he mourns. This comparison, while relevant, is less salient than the “notion that Rushdie’s Kashmir is a proxy for the now-partitioned subcontinent itself—a subcontinent with communities often viciously portioned off into violently sectarian camps.” (*Salman Rushdie Loses His Cheerfulness: Geopolitics, Terrorism and Adultery*, 258). In his effort to give voice to that loss, he touches upon what has been described as “Kashmiriyat”- a way of life and culture, accommodating, inclusive and welcoming. The two central characters in the novel, Boonyi and Noman, are children of a Kashmiri Pandit and a Muslim village chieftain, and there seems to be no communal/ religious/ cultural tension simmering at the prospect of their marital union. As Patricia Kelly points out succinctly, “It is an in- between place where everyone must accommodate other people’s self- definitions. There, Muslims and Hindus coexist raucously but peaceably- every day an opportunity for conflict but also for re-invention. Humour maintains boundaries while deflating tensions. Kashmiriyat- the belief in a common bond that transcends all the other differences- guides daily interactions and gives the region a distinctive identity.” (*Review on Shalimar the Clown*, 472).

In *Shalimar the Clown*, Rushdie’s prime focus is the depiction of a modern day loss of Eden. Kashmir is presented almost as a prelapsarian landscape, arrested in time, away from the hullabaloo of the Pre-Independence chaos and excitement of impending freedom. He talks about the harmonious and “tolerant society of pre-partition Kashmir, in which Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Sikh families lived together, ate together and intermarried, evoking this harmony through a host of literary and cultural allusions, descriptions of food, art and history. These images of peaceful co-existence give Rushdie’s description of the bloody and brutal obliteration of this society and its individual members over the decades that follow particular force.” (*Salman Rushdie Loses His Cheerfulness: Geopolitics, Terrorism and Adultery*, 258) Rushdie’s evocation of the destruction of Kashmiriyat, the uniquely tolerant and independent cultural style of Kashmir, is most powerful and most moving when it is most specific. Allegory, irony, fable, joke and metaphor all serve to enhance our feeling for Kashmiri society and the quirks and odd ball relationships it allowed to flourish among its members. When Rushdie depicts Kashmir’s transformation from the poly-vocal and diverse community that orients itself around Kashmiriyat to a ruin of wasted lives, he shows us the fragility of social bonds and culture in the face of wilful ignorance and violence. In these moments, specificity

and allegory work hand in hand to convey to us both the value of what has been lost and the terror that such losses will continue as long as the forces of hatred, revenge, ideology and fanaticism are rampant. “No solution or specific form of hope is offered.” (*Salman Rushdie Loses His Cheerfulness: Geopolitics, Terrorism and Adultery*, 262)

And yet, the celebration / glorification of this past, and the nostalgia for a lost culture may seem to be presenting only one part of the narrative. Questions have been raised regarding how much of this “Kashmiriyat” is a perceived reality of the masses and the state and how much of it has been a construction, a narrative foisted upon the troubled land to conceal uncomfortable realities. There is also the widely believed idea regarding the naiveté of “kashmiriyat” as an idea / faith. But Suvir Kaul points out, “While *Kashmiriyat* as idea and as description of shared lives and cultural assumptions across religious communities has been belittled as a utopian, retrospective back formation that attempts to paper over age-old sectarian and social divides, there is no question that the melding of Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim ideals provided Kashmiris with a vast reservoir of spiritual ideas at odds with more doctrinaire and prescriptive forms of religious belief. (*Of Gardens and Graves*, 137). The second sense in which the ideal of *Kashmiriyat* might be a difficult one to use and implement to find a solution to the problems of the state is that the logic of advantage and opportunity in the modern world depends upon mobility and osmosis. The strongest claims for integrating larger and larger areas, through trade and movement of people, is precisely that, aspirationally, regions begin to define themselves in cosmopolitan terms. As a political ideal too, it is debilitating because it makes the same mistake of supposing that the appeal to a shared cultural ideal can solve the challenge of political differences.

After India achieved its independence, there was the issue of the princely states choosing to retain their sovereignty or integrating themselves to the Indian republic. That merger posed a problem of a different kind, “in the merger of relatively small identities into new and bigger identities. The new states thus came to develop for the time being split personalities with the loyalties of their citizens (and even of their political elites and the civil servants) torn between old territorial boundaries and new territorial structures. The split in state personalities would have one of its significant manifestations in the regional sentiment which would develop around loyalties to old territorial units. This is the primary factor explaining the success of princes in elections.” (*Cultural Pluralism, National Integration and Democracy in India*, 905). Politically, the question of belonging for the Kashmiris has always been one embroiled in controversy. It was an area

trapped between the incompatible logics of three different nationalisms- India, Pakistan and Kashmir itself- that pulled at it enough to tear it apart.

For almost half a century, Kashmir has not seen a fair and unrigged electoral process. After the imposition of Article 370, granting the state special status and giving draconian rights to the Indian Army, there has been little done by the central government with its fountainhead in New Delhi to change the ways things have been run. IN 1953, Sheikh Abdullah wanted to explore the possibilities of a more independent politics or even the possibilities were available in Article 370, but he was incarcerated for 20 years. The following decades were no different. Elections were rigged and no one with any iota of sympathy/ affiliation or Pro- Pakistan Links were allowed to contest the elections. The turnig point was the 1987 State Elections which is now looked at as the last straw on the camel's back. The frustrations now grew to snowball into a vortex of violence, resulting in the forced displacement of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley.

To see the displacement and exodus of the Hindus from the valley as only a direct fallout of the 1987 elections would be to only see half a picture. I would like to argue that this was the eruption of decades long simmering anger against the injustice and exploitation that had been handed down to the Muslim majority residing in the state. Even though the majority population of Kashmir is Muslim, it is the Hindu Dogra Kings who had been ruling them over the years. Education and opportunity to jobs and other amenities were unequally distributed, resulting in a social and economic chasm developing between the two communities. As Zutshi points out, “The vast majority of Muslim peasants and indeed city based artisans saw none of the benefits of the centralised administration; they continued to live at subsistence levels while being forced to yield both unpaid labour virtually on demand as well as crippling taxes on their produce. This was not the case with Kashmiri Hindus; no more than 5% of the population, they wielded disproportionate power as revenue gatherers, accountants, civic administrators and landholders. Pandits had developed levels of literacy which made them indispensable to the lower rungs of the administration... Pandits were the Kashmiri speaking face of State Power.” (*Of Gardens and Graves*, 94).

In its identified its objective as self-determination nationalist identity; the most influential of the conflict, the Jammu and Kashmir position in terms of regional independence. however, throughout the early 1990s, as organizations with different agend as and goals became involved in the conflict. As the ethno-nationalist movement quickly dissipated into a contest

for domination among these various organizations, the conflict took on an explicitly religious tone, with pro-Pakistan groups, such as the moderate Islamist Hizbul Mujahideen and the more extremist Islamist Harkat-Ul-Ansar rising to ascendancy and marginalizing the JKLF. (*India Displacing Indians for the Sake of India*, 92)

In a sense, *Shalimar the Clown* is a sort of war bulletin, an account of the wasteful and despoiling struggle over the valley of Kashmir, combined with an impressionistic depiction of Islamist jihadi terrorism. Although there is a second plotline—a love story, a generational drama and tale of passion, adultery and revenge—woven in with the larger story of Kashmir, it seems as though that narrative is a secondary concern. Rushdie's real interest, his own passion, is reserved in this book for the descent of Kashmir into intercommunal and state-sponsored violence—a descent for which he blames the leadership and military of both India and Pakistan—although he reserves particularly blistering condemnation for the Indian Government and its military policies in the valley. without violence. As Rushdie draws out the contrast between the tolerant society that Kashmiris lost and the violently polarized society that emerged to take its place, the scenes of murder, rape and cruelty he describes convey something like despair. One gets the sense that Rushdie is almost overwhelmed by the capacity of human beings to do dreadful things to one another, and to destroy the human worlds that they themselves have created. The bloody disruption of civic and political order in Kashmir and the massive Indian Security apparatus has meant that for long stretches of time in the last two decades, large sections of the state have been turned into armed camps. The number of people who have disappeared without a trace, or have been imprisoned without any formal charges against them are beyond mathematical measure.

A testimony to Rushdie's sense of empathy is that, toward the end of the novel, he has Shalimar the Clown suspended in mid air between two buildings as he escapes prison, in defiance of tight security measures. It is a deeply moving and poetic image— a trapeze artist making the whole world into a stage, his greatest performance one last proof of his fading humanity. And as Suvir Kaul remarks, “ And Kashmir is now a churning sea of stories, stories which move and mobilise and irrigate suffering and struggle.” (*Of Gardens and Graves*, 49).

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